

Classic Spring Birding

A fortnight spring birding tour, exploring some of the most beautiful, bird-rich landscapes in Europe – the Black Sea coast, the Rhodopes, the Central Balkan and the Vitosha Mountains.

The tour starts with the Rhodope Mountains – a lovely area close to the border with northern Greece. Their western part with rounded, pine-clad hills is occasionally cut by streams and rivers running through deep gorges. One of them is the magnificent Trigrad Gorge – the realm of the Wallcreeper. Its vertical limestone cliffs resound with the noise of numerous Alpine Swifts and Crag Martins and echo with the shrill calls of the Peregrine Falcon. Every now and then White-throated Dippers, Grey and White Wagtails dart over the translucent river.

In the eastern part of the mountain the landscape is radically different – jagged peaks, towering cliffs and sparsely vegetated, boulder-strewn slopes. The most spectacular bird residents there are the Griffon Vultures, inhabiting the crater of an ancient volcano. Black and Egyptian Vultures, White-tailed and Imperial Eagles are also frequent visitors of the feeding tables. We will see many Black Storks nesting on the cliffs. Chukars often stand sentinel on rocky hillsides. The shrill whistles of Rock Nuthatches and the song of the Ortolan Bunting can be heard everywhere around. Other typically Balkan birds, like the Pallid Swift, the Red-rumped Swallow, the Blue Rock Thrush, the Eastern race of the Black-eared Wheatear, the Orphean, Sardinian, Subalpine, Eastern Bonelli's and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, the Sombre Tit, the Black-headed Bunting, are common there too. A visit to the Vulture Conservation Centre, run by the BSPB and Neophron Tours is also planned.

While we drive to the southern Black Sea coast we will stop in the Sakar Hills and Strandzha Mountain, where we will be looking for the Eastern Imperial Eagle, Levant Sparrowhawk, Masked Shrike, Olive-tree Warbler and Orphean Warbler. The Sakar is an area of rounded hills and open valleys, where most of the lowland is step-like grassland with scattered trees, bushes and agricultural plots. It is Bulgaria's Imperial Eagles stronghold. The Strandzha, on the other hand, is an endless chain of mild crests and folding wood-covered tops that provide shelter to the Booted Eagle, the Masked Shrike, the Olive-tree Warbler, the Semi-collared Flycatcher, etc. Rollers, Bee-eaters, Hoopoes and Black-headed Buntings are everywhere along the roads.

On the Black Sea coast we will first explore the lakes around the city of Bourgas: it is a complex of extensive wetlands that form one of Europe's richest bird areas. The greatest lure of the Bourgas wetlands are the huge flocks of resident White and Dalmatian Pelicans. At the shallow saline lagoons of Atanassovsko and Pomorie lakes traditional salt pans are still functioning. They are of major importance for a huge number of birds, including the Black-winged Stilt, Broad-billed and Curlew Sandpipers, Marsh Sandpiper, Kentish Plover, Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls, Gull-billed and Sandwich Terns.

Traveling north along the coast we will pass through the Goritca oak forests in the Balkan Mountain's easternmost part and the unique Kamchia riverine forest. En route we can expect to find Black Stork, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Barred Warbler, Semi-collared Flycatcher, Sombre Tit, etc.

May – June

Already at the northern coast, we will dedicate a day to the steppes and cliffs of cape Kaliakra, which, besides being a spectacular sight, is a place hosting the Rose-colored Starling, the Pied Wheatear and the five species of larks, typical for the Balkan peninsula – Calandra Lark, Short-toed Lark, Skylark, Crested Lark and Woodlark. The Stone Curlew, the Lesser Grey Shrike and the Isabelline Wheatear find refuge in the steppe vegetation, while the coastal cliffs are animated by European Shag, Eagle Owl, Long-legged Buzzard. In spring, Mediterranean Shearwaters often fish in the sea close to the cape, attacked by Arctic Skuas.

Another major birding area on the northern coast is that of the Shabla and Durankulak wetlands close to the border with Romania. Over 80 bird species breed in the region of the two lakes, the most interesting of them being the Marsh Harrier, the Collared Pratincole, the Ferruginous Duck, the Red-footed Falcon, the Lesser Grey Shrike. The two lakes are one of the few places in Europe where the Paddyfield Warbler, a typical Asian species, can be easily seen breeding. There we can expect all species of Heron, Little Egret, Pygmy Cormorant, other migrating & summering species of Waders, Gulls and Terns.

The last part of the tour is dedicated to the Central Balkan Range. The mountain's core, the Central Balkan National Park, protects the largest European massif of beech forest, which is over 250 years old. Species of different climatic zones coexist there, including 8 of all 9 owl species breeding in Bulgaria. We will arrive in the area in the afternoon, visit some old beech forests for Red-breasted Flycatcher, White-backed Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker, and take a night walk (optional) for Ural Owl.

Finally we will explore the conifer and alpine zones of the Vitosha Nature Park for high mountain birds like Spotted Nutcracker, Common Crossbill, Ring Ouzel, Firecrest and Goldcrest, Willow Tit, Water Pipit, Alpine Accentor, Shore Lark (ssp. balcanica), etc.

During the trip we will see a lot of White Stork nests. Roller, Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Syrian Woodpecker, Olivaceous Warbler, Black-headed subspecies of the Yellow Wagtail, Spanish Sparrow, Black-headed Bunting, Ortolan Bunting, etc. are almost everywhere in the lowlands.

Itinerary:



- Day 1
Arrival at Sofia Airport and transfer to Trigrad
- Day 2
Trigrad Gorge and drive to the Eastern Rhodopes
- Days 3 & 4
The Eastern Rhodopes
- Day 5
Transfer to Bourgas with stops in the Sakar Hills and Strandzha Mountain
- Days 6 & 7
The Bourgas wetlands
- Day 8
Transfer to Coastal Dobroudzha with stops at Goritza and the Kamchia riverine forests
- Day 9
Cape Kaliakra steppes and cliffs
- Day 10
Shabla and Durankulak lakes
- Day 11
Drive to the Central Balkan Mountain
- Day 12
The Central Balkan Mountain; drive to the Vitosha Mountain
- Day 13
The Vitosha Mountain
- Day 14
Departure from Sofia



Griffon Vulture & Egyptian Vulture



Pied Wheatear



Paddyfield Warbler



Semi-collared Flycatcher



Eastern Imperial Eagle



Masked Shrikes



Squacco Heron